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JENNIFER L. HOCHSCHILD

Making White Americans and Excluding Nonwhite Americans Through Immigration Laws

Desmond King. *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000). Pp. xi + 388. \$45.00

“Research on American immigration policy and history is considerable, and research on American racial attitudes and policies is vast—but embarrassingly few people have drawn clear and compelling links between the two topics. This book does. *Making Americans* is history for our times; it brings a completely contemporary sensibility to a very traditional subject and thereby illuminates both current debates and historical causes.”

That is what I wrote for the back cover of Desmond King’s newest book, and I’m relieved to report that upon rereading it, I would write exactly the same thing. This book does not break brand-new conceptual ground, but that is not its purpose. Instead, it provides a thorough and fascinating study of the racial impetus behind America’s restrictive immigration laws of the 1920s and, not as thoroughly, of its embarrassed retreat from those laws in the 1960s. King focuses less on the effects of immigration policy for immigrants and would-be immigrants than for people who are already Americans, especially those of African origin. He also continually draws our attention to the fact that immigration policy and its consequences together create and delineate whiteness and, by implication, blackness or foreignness or non-Americanness.

King begins with a serviceable delineation of various ways in which non-Americans could be incorporated into American society, ranging from assimilation into an Anglo-Saxon mold through

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cultural pluralism to a full-blown multicultural celebration of difference. Most of the book revolves around the front end of that continuum, since debates over incorporation in the first few decades of the twentieth century ran the gamut from complete assimilationism to melting-pot assimilationism (which permitted the possibility that Anglo-Saxons might change a little at the same time that immigrants were changing a lot). After its conceptual beginning, *Making Americans* is organized chronologically with something of a topical focus for each chapter—the 1911 Dillingham Commission that established the old immigrant–new immigrant distinction, the role of eugenics in shaping the debate over immigration law, the congressional debates over the 1924 national origins law, the changes in immigration policy resulting in the 1965 rejection of national origins quotas, and so on. The most innovative topic is a heartbreaking depiction of how African Americans struggled to be included in the definition of “American,” how they were (at best) ignored or (at worst) cast out and lynched, and how their lives were consequently affected.

The main effect of that discussion is to make one wonder why so many African Americans tried so hard for so long to be incorporated into a polity that treated them so badly. King’s sympathies are (perhaps too often) made clear, and he backs his sympathy with eloquent quotations and striking data. The second most interesting topic, also clarified by illuminating quotations and pertinent data, is the way in which the category of “white” (which was roughly synonymous with “American” and “good”) was defined, redefined, refined, and otherwise massaged in the half a century after 1880. The category “white” shifted from encompassing only Anglo-Saxons and Protestant Germans (remember the ads that said, “Pure Americans. No rats, no Greeks” and “No Irish need apply”) to encompassing all northern Europeans, to evicting Germans and Irish along with southern Europeans, and so on. As international politics, religious and linguistic anxieties, the supposed science of eugenics, and settlement patterns shifted, so did the list of favored “races.” At various points (for example, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the 1917 Immigration Act excluding most Asians, the 1921 law favoring northern Europeans, the 1924 law favoring the English over other northern Europeans), a particular choice of who was allowed to be “white” would be enacted into law. King tracks these shifts beautifully and his underlying point about their essential arbitrariness comes through strongly.

For all my admiration of *Making Americans*, I have three criticisms. The book would have benefited greatly from a consideration of Asian Americans parallel to that of African Americans. After all, they were also written out of citizenship as nonwhite and hopelessly un-American; they too were ignored when they were not denigrated. Did they insist as much as some African Americans that they too were real Americans? Did they develop a quasi-separatist movement analogous to that of followers of Marcus Garvey? If King had made a parallel study of Asian Americans, he could have developed a more sophisticated theoretical analysis of "race" since he could have shown how African Americans and Asian Americans were, and were not, similarly situated. That would have then opened the door to an analysis of the extraordinary change in the standing of Asian Americans since the 1950s, from barely tolerated foreigners to model minority. Why have they become "honorary whites," to use Andrew Hacker's phrase, while African Americans still struggle to be something other than the opposite of white? This book leads us to ask that question, but it does not give us much in the way of an answer.

Second, King does not make clear enough why he focuses on eugenics as the primary cause of the 1924 immigration law. Was it the main force behind the law? Is he correcting for a lack of attention from other scholars? Is this simply the aspect of the complex policy process that King finds most interesting, given his underlying focus on racial formation? He points out, after all, that a "multiplicity of pressures" gave rise to the 1924 law of national origins (193) and that the eugenics movement was not strong enough to keep out Mexican workers. So how did these other pressures weigh against eugenics in keeping southern Europeans out, and why did they outweigh eugenics in allowing Mexicans in? In short, to what degree was the 1924 law a result of racial prejudice, compared with international politics, economic incentives, or some other factor?

Finally, I was not satisfied by the book's treatment of the contemporary movements of ethnic revivalism, multiculturalism, and support for affirmative action. King provides a reasonable description of each phenomenon, then asserts in each case that the contours of current beliefs and debates grow out of the framework set in the 1920s. That is plausible, but he does not show how. I am not asking for a complete history from 1924 onward for each movement. But we do need much more than the repeated assurance that "the decisions of the 1920s acted over the long run to confirm the significance of ethnicity [in the 1960s and later]" (263) or "some of the

historical sources of this trajectory [i.e., increasing white hostility to affirmative action] . . . lie in the way in which policy-makers conceived of American identity and implemented it in immigration legislation between 1882 and 1965" (266).

Setting aside what King does not do sufficiently, it seems appropriate in concluding to point out how much he does do. Anyone who cares about the connections among American identity, law, and racial hierarchy needs to read this book; anyone at all will benefit from attending to its disturbing portrayals of our great-grandparents, most dramatically in their own words.

Jennifer Hochschild is Professor of Government, Harvard University. She is the author of *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (Princeton University Press, 1995). She has two books forthcoming: *Madison's Constitution and Identity Politics* and *The American Dream and the Public Schools*.